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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes about the way women talk grow out of knowledge of nonlinguistic, societally assigned sex role traits and of linguistic correlates of those traits. Among the findings of research on male/female speech differences are that, contrary to the stereotype, men talk more than women; men's conversation is task-oriented, while that of women is ego enhancing to others; in most speech communities women use more standard phonology and syntax than men; and women use certain female-typed words in some circumstances. Such differences are learned as linguistic aspects of a sex role and are neither genetic nor universal. Not all studies have found sex-linked language differences, and the findings of many studies reflect a comparison of women with men of presumably the same, though in reality lower, class status, due to a methodological bias. In addition to differences in language usage, conversations between the sexes often involve interruptions of women's speech, and a lack of attention to women's conversation by men. But even if a woman exactly duplicates men's language use, she will not be evaluated in the same way, since subjective appraisals of women and men as speakers are based on an interaction between a speaker's activities and the language and sex role stereotypes known to the listener. (GT)

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Genderlects: A Brief Review of the Literature

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If I tell you that stereotypes exist for what women vs. men like to do, wear, read, eat, and watch on TV, and also for how the two sexes talk, can you imagine what some of these might be? (The truth or justice of the stereotypes is not my point; simply that they exist.) Imagine the stereotypical female speaker. Perhaps for you, she gabs or talks on and on or talks about inane topics. Maybe she talks uncertainly, using many tag questions and answering other people's questions with rising intonation, as though she isn't sure of the answer (Q: What's your name? A: Mary?). Perhaps she utters many descriptive words, making her talk seem elaborate, or maybe she simply uses certain descriptors that men don't, like adorable or divine, carried along by exageratedly varied intonation. Whether you believe the stereotype is right or wrong, the chances are very great that you know what it is (Edelsky, 1974). Cartoon and script writers often tap into your knowledge of that language/sex role stereotype, depending on your knowledge of it to elicit predictable responses to their characterizations.

The stereotype or shared knowledge we have about the way women talk grows out of two kinds of knowledge: (1) minute details about other aspects of stereotypically defined sex roles (like details of personality attributes, object preferences, etc.); and (2) linguistic ways of

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signalling these nonlinguistic traits of uncertainty, passivity, submissiveness, etc. The fact that we have much less defined stereotypes, if any, about men as speakers reflects the fact that males and male activity are so much considered the norm (Broverman, et al., 1972) that they are unremarkable; i.e., the way men talk counts as the way people in general talk.

Like language/sex stereotypes, the huge recent increase in research on male/female differences in speech also depended at first on this common knowledge of nonlinguistic, societally assigned role traits and of linguistic correlates of those traits. In addition, there were studies which tried to find evidence for the truth or falseness of aspects of the already existing linguistic stereotype of women as speakers. There were studies that investigated quantity of speech (the gabby woman), women's and men's use of lexical domains (women attending to uninteresting or trivial topics), sex-linked use of qualifiers (women's tendency toward excessive embellishment), degree of standardness of phonological and syntactic variables (the Correct woman) (see Thorne and Henley, 1975, for a comprehensive annotated bibliography on the whole topic of language and sex).

The sex-differentiated language picture that emerged from this early work (similar studies along these lines are still being conducted) showed that, when actual usage was investigated, there were indeed differences, but not always in the expected direction. Contrary to the stereotype, men were the big talkers. Whether in elicited conversations (Oetzel, 1966), jury deliberations (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956), in high

school classrooms (Barron, 1971), in interview settings (Swacker, 1973), or among female students trying to be popular with males (Komarovsky, 1946), women did not take up as much of the talking space as men. An old study (Moore, 1922) showed women and men talking about different topics to people of the same sex, but in mixed sex groups, both women and men changed their topics, presumably to accommodate to the other. What is noteworthy here is the example this research provides of the truism that research bias dies hard. Despite the change in topics when the listeners' sex varied, Moore concluded that "ineradicable differences" in the "original capacities" of the two sexes is what produced such different topics of interest. Women and men do know different lexicons, stemming from their knowledge of and experience with different domains, which in turn grows out of societally assigned roles which place each sex in unequal contact with these domains.

Women used more mmhmm's in conversation, an utterance that was strategically placed to function not as a theft of the turn for the mmhmm-er, but as an encouragement for the current speaker (Hirschmann, 1973). Women and men of equal rank at psychiatric staff meetings used humor differently. Men told the jokes; women laughed (Coser, 1960). In mixed-sex dyads having discussions on experimenter-assigned topics, women more often couched their opinions in personal statements (I think that people have trouble with . . . .), while men made more general statements, as though their opinions were fact (Most people have trouble with . . . .) (Hirschmann, 1973).

Men and women had different styles of describing pictures. Men tended to describe observable features (Wood, 1966) and make definitive statements about features like the number of objects present (Swacker, 1973), while women described connotatively or interpretively (Wood, 1966) and were more approximate in relation to the number of items in a picture (Swacker, 1973).

A predominant conversational role taken by men has been shown to be a task-oriented one, including the initiation of solutions and activities. Women have demonstrated the taking on of an ego-enhancing, socio-emotional role, reacting to the contributions of others (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956; Soskin and John, 1963).

Male and female members of the audiences at academic conferences displayed different speaking roles also. When women questioned the speaker, they asked questions of clarification. When males questioned (at a rate far exceeding their proportion of the audience), they held the floor for a longer time, uttered lengthy prefaces to their questions, and the preface itself functioned to deflect the focus of the topic to tangential issues (Swacker, 1976).

Women do use more varied intonation and particular contours more frequently than men (McConnell-Ginet, 1978) and, as we all know by our ability to recognize most female vs. male voices on the phone, the two sexes use different average pitch and resonance. An interesting finding, however, is that when anatomical features are controlled (vocal tract size, height, weight, etc.), there is still great variation in sound frequencies (resulting in pitch and resonance), more than can be accounted

for by physical differences. In other words, we learn to, and at some level we control, how "male" or how "female" we sound (Mattingly, 1966).

Most studies have shown women to use more standard phonology and syntax than men (Kramer, et al., 1978). However, others show that in certain American and British speech communities, the opposite is the case (Trudgill, 1972; Nichols, 1976). In Norwich, England, age interacted with sex to predict standardness; i.e., women under 30 seemed to be adopting stigmatized forms while women over 30 avoided them. According to Nichols (1976), the contradictory findings are not contradictory. What seems to be happening is that the circumstances of women's lives, the relationships they have and want, provide them with both social and linguistic options, so that in one community it is more advantageous, from women's perspectives, to use more standard language and in another the reverse is true.

In informal contexts where sex-typed activity is taking place, women did produce items that we believe they do, items in the language sex stereotype (darling, adorable, so, etc.) (Menzel and Tyler, 1977). Men also list more "dirty words" on demand (Tyler, 1977).

It is important to remember that the differences that are found are neither genetic nor universal. Rather, they are learned as linguistic aspects of a sex-role. In fact, elsewhere in the world, the same linguistic feature becomes part of the baggage of the role behavior of the opposite sex. For example, in certain African tribes, it is the men who use the more acceptable language features (Seitel, 1969), and in Banaras, India, it is the men who use the more exaggerated intonation contours (Christian, ms.).

Not all studies have found sex-linked language differences, though. Using the stereotypic roles that have men as "do-ers" and women as "be-ers," Barron (1971) tried to find out if men used more agentive (do-er) cases than women. Her subjects did not differ on this measure. Both sexes used qualifiers equally both orally (Hirschmann, 1974) and in writing (Kramer, 1974a). No sex-linked difference was found in the use of tag questions (DuBois and Crouch, 1975) or in the use of question intonotation when answering a question (Edelsky, in press).

Most studies which have found sex/language differences make some effort to compare men and women from the same social class. Some, like the studies that investigate differential use of phonological variants, make a very careful effort to categorize people according to socio-economic status and then compare subjects who are alike on that dimension. When sex/language differences appear, it then looks like sex rather than socio-economic status is the important variable. Unfortunately, common methods of categorizing people according to socio-economic status use the husband's or father's status as the determinant of the woman's status, even though the woman may have more education than the man in question (education is one of the factors involved in computing socio-economic status). In addition, "stenographer" and "mechanic" may be classified as same-status occupations. The result is that women are often misclassified because of a bias in the methodology and are then found to use different language from men. What those language differences may actually reflect in some cases is the fact that women are being compared to men of presumably the same, though in reality lower, class status and also to men whose jobs are likely to be less language oriented (Nichols, 1978).[1]

So the picture this far is of a woman who talks less, with a higher voice, generally uses more standard language and particular intonation contours, acts more as an ego-enhancer with talk, describes with less specificity, lists fewer obscenities, laughs at men's jokes, uses certain female-typed words under some circumstances, etc. If then, women started to say damned right and stopped saying goodness gracious, would that show that they were equal in power to men; i.e., is the research that looks for differential use of particular predesignated linguistic variables the most fruitful place to find out how unequal power is reflected and maintained in language? Recent analyses of conversation indicate that the deep power imbalance between the sexes is played out in daily language interactions among intimates and lesser knowns, but not in obvious ways.

Men usurp women's turns by interrupting them (Zimmerman and West, 1975) just as adults usurp children's; i.e., the less powerful have restricted rights to talk. Ginet's (1978) explanation of intonation variability reveals how vocal dynamism can be used if one is more ignoreable and needs to work harder to hold the attention of others. Women disclose more about themselves (Henley, 1977), just as low status males self-disclose more to high-status males. The resulting imbalance in information makes the known one vulnerable to the knower's use of the knowledge given over by the former. When men's talk is neutral or ego-deflating to women (Soskin and John, 1963), and women's is neutral or ego-enhancing to men (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956), then men's superior power is doubly buttressed: (1) absolutely, by their enhanced feelings of self-worth; and (2) relatively, by women's deflated feelings--all accomplished at least in part by the functions of the opposite sex's talk.

Though the great number of studies showing men dominating the talking time also reflect status, an exceptionally clear picture of how power is accomplished as an everyday activity in conversation comes from Pamela Fishman's (1978) work. Defining power as the ability to maintain and have accepted by others one's own definition of the situation, she shows how, among couples ostensibly working at nonsexist relationships, the assymetry is perpetuated through language activity. The women's topics were minimally responded to, elicited no questions, their statements were left unattended regardless of the actual topic (whether it was running out of catsup or interpreting a new mathematical theory). The women even promoted their offerings, prefacing topics with "this is interesting," trying to elicit a conversation. Their male partners simply did not do their part of the conversational work. However, when the men brought up topics (once, again, mundane household topics or intellectual ones), the women encouraged more talk by asking questions and commenting on their comments; i.e., by doing the interactional work. The results are that His topics seem to be more interesting because they have been responded to; His definition of the situation (what is worth talking about) is maintained while Hers is not; His power is both reflected and constructed anew.

Our knowledge of how conversation works and what women do and have done to them that functions to perpetuate their lesser power is scant. Taking the great leap then between a few findings and a practical application question, is it in women's best interests to start interrupting, stop responding so enthusiastically to men's utterances, start saying

mmmm after a long pause following something said by a man (delayed minimal responses are one way men control topics) (Zimmerman and West, 1975)? If starting to say damned nice and stopping the utterance of adorable is not very useful because the social impact of language/sex differences does not rest primarily in lexical choice, would a change in verbal interaction (turn taking, topic control, topic construction, etc.) have any effect? Language is not only a carrier of content and a goader to action; it is action itself. When a woman first changes her interactional style, she engages in a political action (i.e., she upsets existing expectations based on power arrangements) if, that is, she does not surround her changed language use with announcements, accounts, or explanations. However, even if she exactly duplicates a man's language use, she will not be evaluated nor responded to with a similar degree of positiveness (Bernard, 1964; Kramer, 1974b; Edelsky, in press). Therefore, the hoped-for results of the language change may not ensue. Double standards exist so that, for instance, when a man talks at length he is considered unnoteworthy, but when a woman does that, she is gabby. Our subjective appraisals of and responses to women and men as speakers are not, then, based entirely on the speaker's activities, but rather, on an interaction between the language and sex-role stereotype we all know (even if we do not agree with it) and the speaker's activities. This brings us full circle to the issue presented at the beginning—sex-role stereotypes carried over into language. Is the circularity a compositional device, a neutral metaphor, or a female symbol?

Notes

[1]One of the most academically exciting aspects of women's studies research (of which language/sex role research is a part), is the finding of some formerly unseen bias that brings into question the results, conclusions, and methodology of previous research. By providing a new vision, women's studies research often moves an entire field forward--unfortunately, not without the screaming and flailing of some who are committed to or benefit from the old view.

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